

Beyond John 3:16
John 3:1-17
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My guess is you don't know who Rollen Stewart is. But I bet you would recognize him when you saw him. Not if he was just walking down the street, though. You'd have to see him in his most famous setting: usually right behind the goal posts at a football game, or behind the catcher at a baseball game. Rockin' Rollen always stood out for two reasons: his rainbow wig, and the sign he displayed. You're watching the game, they flash the score, and you see, "Bears 14, Packers 10, John 3:16."

Rollen Stewart made it his personal crusade to spread the word of God by showing his John 3:16 sign at every sporting event he could attend. And what better way to share the good news than with that passage? It's arguably the most famous one in the Bible, and has developed a cultural reputation as the gospel in miniature. I had an unbelieving friend who told me that he memorized John 3:16 just so he could impress girls at parties. I don't think that's what Jesus meant by "love thy neighbor," but it does show the influence and popularity of John 3:16 as the ultimate Christian slogan: "For God so loved the world..."

But to only know John 3:16 as an isolated verse, removed from its context, robs us of understanding its full power and meaning. Jesus didn't say these words so that Christian bumper sticker makers would have something to work with. He said them as a response to a searching question from a man struggling to understand who Jesus was and what Jesus was trying to accomplish.

That man was Nicodemus, who appears only in John's gospel. We are told that Nicodemus is not only a Pharisee, one of the religious groups who opposed Jesus, but that he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council that will eventually falsely accuse Jesus and condemn him to die.

But on this night, there's more going on inside Nicodemus. He's been witness to some of Jesus' miraculous signs, and he wants to know more. On the surface, this seems like a good thing; we would hope that people would see Jesus' action and respond with curiosity. But Jesus was also wary of people like Nicodemus, people who only saw Jesus as a supernatural magician or miracle worker, and missed the bigger picture of Jesus as the proclaimer and revealer of God's kingdom.

John makes it clear that Jesus doesn't fully trust Nicodemus and his questions, asked not only in the darkness of the night, but in the darkness of Nicodemus' spiritual misunderstanding. At the end of the previous chapter, after Jesus had worked a few miracles, John writes, "'Now while Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus..." See what John does there? He chastises people for their short-sighted miracle-based belief in Jesus, and then offers up Nicodemus as a prime example. To believe in Jesus solely because of the miracles he worked was to completely miss his whole reason for becoming flesh.

That's why Jesus ignores Nicodemus' flattery and moves right to the issue at hand: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Nicodemus, who continues to miss the point, balks at this suggestion, hearing it as a literal prescription instead of a spiritual command. His mind turns from theology to obstetrics. "Surely a man cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

So Jesus tries again to help Nicodemus move from darkness to light, explaining to him how we are born in the flesh, but also must be born of God's uncontrollable, unpredictable Spirit. And once again, Nicodemus, still standing in the darkness, responds, "How can this be?" As patient as he is trying to be, I think Jesus gets a little exasperated with Nicodemus here when he responds, "You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?"

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus must have sounded impossible. I don't think Nicodemus was playing dumb; he was, after all, a teacher of Israel. But there was nothing in the Jewish religion that compared to what Jesus was talking about. Nicodemus simply couldn't relate to Jesus' words. Nicodemus is thinking of only earthly things, while Jesus is talking to him about heavenly things. He wants to believe Jesus, he knows this kind of spiritual rebirth is necessary, but he doesn't see how it is possible.

It's the same way we often react when God's Spirit begins to stir in our lives. We're sitting there, all comfortable and content and feeling like maybe, finally, we've got a handle on this faith thing, and God comes along with a stick and stirs up the waters in what used to be our calm little puddle, calling us to do something new or reach out beyond ourselves or step out of our comfort zones, and our first reaction is usually, "But that's impossible!"

I think when it comes to faith, there's such a thing as being too smart, and I believe this was part of Nicodemus' trouble. It's certainly important to have an intellectual grasp on the basic tenets of Christian beliefs, but I also believe it's possible to overthink our faith. Nicodemus analyzes Jesus' words from a rational, logical standpoint and concludes that what Jesus is saying simply isn't within the realm of reality. But God is not limited to operating within that realm. Nicodemus was not allowing room in his understanding for the work of the Holy Spirit, which operates beyond the boundaries of human control. If we're not careful, a faith based solely on intellect will always find a way to rationalize the response, "But that's impossible!"

I remember hearing those words at a Board meeting a few years ago. We were presenting our long range plan, an ambitious report that I believe captured the spirit of who God was calling this church to be. After the plan was presented, one board member said, "This all sounds well and good on paper, but as I read through it, I have no idea how we're going to get all this done!" In other words, "That's impossible!" And you know what? She was right! There was no way we could do all that alone.

You're calling me to serve as an Elder or Sunday school teacher? That's impossible! Forgive that other person for what they've done to me? That's impossible! Trust you, God, instead of trusting my own strengths? That's impossible! Give myself over to the work of the uncontrollable, unpredictable spirit? That's impossible!

You know what? You're right. Those things are impossible. But here's the thing: we believe in an impossible God! We believe in a God who can make the impossible possible! Create this beautiful world from scratch? That's possible! Use a stuttering shepherd to rescue the Israelites from slavery and lead them through the middle of a sea?

That's possible! Use a poor teenage virgin to be the vessel that delivers God's son into this world? That's possible! As the angel told Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Nicodemus assumed he can explain what Jesus does through his preconceived categories of what was and wasn't possible. He keeps using these categories as the criteria to determine whether what Jesus says is true or not, and Jesus keeps shattering those criteria. In the end, Jesus says, there is only one category, one criteria, for determining the answer to all our questions about God: God so loves this world. If that statement is true, than anything is possible.

It is that ultimate truth that makes sense of everything we think is impossible. Intellectual understanding is important, but that's not what drives you to the bedside of a dying person. Rational explanations can be helpful, but they don't spur you to make the meal to take to the sick person. We don't do those kinds of things out of knowledge or intellect; we do them out of love for each other as God's children. There is a limit to what we can know, and when life takes us beyond that limit, beyond what we can understand, we have this truth to hold onto: God so loves this world.

I don't know about you, but when I run up against things that I just don't understand, that I can make sense of, that I just don't get – why is this happening now? Why to this person? How can I do this? It's impossible! – even as I continue to struggle and wrestle with my lack of understanding, I hold onto the assurance that somehow, when all is said and done, the answer will be, "God so loves this world."

Karl Barth was one of the most brilliant theologians of the 20th century. This man had spent his life pondering the deepest matters of belief, trying to wrap his mind around the improbabilities of faith, asking questions that led to more questions. Toward the end of his life, he was asked to sum up the essence of all his learning and writings on the Christian faith. He thought for a moment, smiled, and said, "Jesus loves me, this I know."

When all was said and done, with all that he had answered and all that was left unanswered, with all that he understood and all that was unable to be understood, there was one thing he knew for certain: that God so loves this world. This whole world? Everybody? Even me? That's impossible! Yes, yes it is. But we worship an impossible God.